



New Directions in Indian Cinema

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films ever made in the small, intimate gauge); the complex interweaving of its three strands; its totemic stacking of one image above another; even its title, which echoes "Custer's Last Stand" and "Krapp's Last Tape"—is the artist's confrontation of the inevitability of death. Yes, Schneemann seems to say, what we love most will change and disappear, and often despite the security we may feel around us; but the answer is not to withdraw our love, but to intensify it. If we can't live forever, we must live more sensitively, more deeply, in the time we have.

NOTES

1. Carolee Schneemann, *More Than Meat Joy*, ed. Bruce McPherson (New Paltz, N.Y.: Documentext, 1979), p. 9.
2. Schneemann made this clear in an interview I conducted with her on November 2, 1979: "I'm a painter, working with my body and ways of thinking about movement and environment that come out of the discipline of having painted for six or eight hours a day for years. That's got to be the root of my language in any medium. I'm not a film-maker. I'm not a photographer. I'm this painter who's working again with extended, related materials. I don't want to feel that as a film-maker I'm competing with people who have defined that one area as their specific and complete focus." The other quotations in this essay are taken from the same interview, which was published in *Millennium Film Journal*, Fall 1980.
3. Schneemann: "In Venice there were all these men following me around and everywhere spires and towers."
4. Schneemann used an old-fashioned step-printer (a device which allows the film-maker to print film a frame at a time) to develop permutations from 8mm film scraps and scrapbook photos which had been recorded during the course of the relationship. The step-printer allowed her to manipulate the movement within the imagery by printing the same frame over and over so that the imagery is still, by printing consecutive frames and creating normal motion, and by re-ordering frames so as to create reverse motion, erratic motion, acceleration and deceleration. She was able to print four separate 8mm frames within a 16mm frame, and to vary the configurations of these frames-within-the-frame by printing the same, or different, images in each of the four quadrants, by "mirror printing" the same image four times so that one half of the 16mm frame is the reverse of the other (this creates a kaleidoscopic effect when the 8mm imagery is moving), by turning 8mm images upside down, and by superimposing more than one image within one or more of the quadrants.
5. *Autobiographical Trilogy* has been mysteriously absent from several recent surveys of autobiographical film-making: Schneemann is not discussed in the autobiography/diary section of the first issue of *Millennium Film Journal* (it includes P. Adams Sitney's long essay, "Autobiography in Avant-Garde Film"); and she was not included in extensive retrospectives of autobiographical film at the Art Gallery of Ontario in 1978 and at Anthology Film Archives in summer, 1979, despite the fact that her work predates and is more fully autobiographical than many of the films which were included. Nevertheless, when definitive retrospectives of this genre of avant-garde film are held, and definitive histories are written, Schneemann is sure to have a prominent place.

CHIDANANDA DAS GUPTA

New Directions in Indian Cinema

Indian cinema faces the eighties, indeed the twenty-first century, with a confidence few countries can equal. As a mass medium as well as an art, it is on a continuous upswing. Over 700 features in 16 languages (more than half of them in color) were made in 1979. The equivalent of some \$225 million are annually invested in the production sector of what is the tenth largest industry in a fast industrializing country. The all-India film made in Hindi, a language spoken in five states but widely understood in others, is made mostly in Bombay and accounts for about 25% of the total production; the rest is made in 15 regional languages at

a relatively low cost. The number of cinemagoers—about 10 million a day—is restricted only by the dearth of cinema theaters (9500), especially in rural areas. A "parallel" cinema with a markedly greater creative energy, arising in the regional languages, has begun to turn sideways and poach into "commercial" territory.

Television, with only a half million or so sets for India's population of more than 600 million, is heavily dependent on film for its programming; in any event, since TV sets are very expensive in terms of Indian incomes, it can have no effect except on a tiny elite for many decades. The field

day for the Indian cinema should thus extend well into a future that, for the present, seems limitless. 2000 A.D. might find us making over a thousand feature films a year for an audience of 20 million a day, or more.

The just-deposed Chief Minister of Tamil Nadua (South India), one of the largest states in the country, is a popular actor of many years standing. Soon after Mr. M.G. Ramachandran (better known as "MGR") took over government, he found himself short of funds for paying his income taxes. With admirable candor, the matinée idol went to the state legislature, stated his reasons, and obtained permission to act in a few films in order to clear his tax dues. So there he was, dressed in red and black (the colors of his party) playing the swashbuckling hero to buxom young women, in between cabinet meetings. To that, Mr. Ronald Reagan could not hold a candle.

And this is not an isolated case; more than a decade ago, the film industry virtually took over the government in this South Indian State. When

the DMK party overthrew the Congress party, which had ruled since independence in 1947, nine of the ten members of its first cabinet came from the cinema. The quite open promotion of DMK politics in the cinema for years on end is something that the Congress had ignored at its peril.

At the close of the seventies, India's population is running at an estimated 630 million. Forty per cent of this number is considered to be living below the poverty line, and mainly concentrated in the 175,000 villages of the country. There is large-scale unemployment in the cities, and slums abound. In the rural areas, the benefits of independence have not reached many; legislation has initiated the process but not terminated the tyranny of the landowner or the grinding poverty of the landless. In spite of this, an India within India is making enormous strides. In a country of 630 million, even 10% makes 63 million—the size of France. The country has the tenth largest GNP, the third largest scientific workforce, in the world. Agricultural surpluses have yielded food stocks that can fight off successive monsoon failures; industrial production is constantly going up. Exports—mainly of engineering products and know-how—are fast expanding; no consumer goods, including durables, are imported, all demand being met by domestic production. Overseas contracts and Indians working abroad, especially in the Middle East, have hoisted foreign-exchange holdings to \$7 billion, despite the need to import a third of our energy. In the commercial world and among the intelligentsia, there is a quiet sense of assurance abroad, in spite of their constant criticism of this governmental action or that and the specter of double-digit inflation.

Imbibing this cream at the top has only hardened the arteries of the mass cinema's social conscience, such as it may have been. The hedonism is complete, and reckless. A third of all the Hindi films of 1978 dealt with the themes of crime and revenge and bear the unmistakable impress of James Bond, complete with electronic gadgetry, nubile females, and high kicks at the villain's chin in slow motion. Traditional values are still adhered to, but the nod at religion is more perfunctory. Sex and violence count for much, and but for a strict censorship, would be rampant. In a word, the mass cinema is more escapist than ever before.

◀ *Commercial cinema: the revenge theme. (Amitabh Bachchan and Rekha in NATWARLAI.)*



The earlier national leadership's Gandhi-Ta-gore-Nehru vision of a dynamic synthesis of East and West, tradition and modernity, had never touched the masses. The obscurantist values of the *nouveau riche*—a byproduct of industrial development—and the traditional petty trader, have dominated the commercial cinema since independence, but never more than today. If these values have been modified to any extent, it is not due to a conscious philosophy but to unavoidable contact with foreign countries, the use of the artifacts of modern industry, and the spread of technical-managerial, in other words utilitarian, education. Contact with the West and West Asia has become too wide and inescapable to bother any more about the contamination of the soul, or the impurities of food. (Until the early decades of this century, crossing the sea was considered sinful by orthodox Hindus; the shadow of a Muslim on one's plate would still make food impure for those high-caste ones left untouched by change.) Hundreds of thousands of Indians, not only managers and engineers but skilled and unskilled laborers, are working in West Asia, Africa, and South East Asia—wherever Indians are building townships, airports, steel plants, or railways. Globe-trotting is no longer reserved for the elegant business executive or college professor. Many a slum dweller or villager has joined the jet set.

Inevitably, there is greater tolerance of realities. Divorce, the working woman, the unwed mother, even "the other woman" (*Pati, Patni aur Woh*) are not sneered at. City women and Westernized people in general are no longer absolute villains (*Namaskar, Badaltay Rishtay*). A raped wife may occasionally be welcomed back into the family by an understanding husband (*Ghar*). A woman can even be an assistant manager in a bank (*Dilsay Milay Dil*) without attracting opprobrium. *Kaliyug* (the evil aeon) has come to be accepted.

It is also evident that this change has been brought about more by new social mobility than by contact with cinema from the West. In spite of ten international film festivals, contact with world cinema is still meager, erratic, and unfruitful as far as the authors of mass cinema are concerned. And the mass audience has been interested in festival films only to the extent of paying a premium, any premium, for films with explicit sex

scenes. To the vast mass of office clerks and shop keepers of New Delhi, a film festival, being free from censorship, is synonymous with pornography; the international film festival in 1979 was widely rejected as a "flop" because its sex quotient was below expectations. The film industry's main interest, apart from lending its presence to oblige the government (the festivals are state-organized) is in plagiarizing storylines and gimmicks. Except for Bondian hedonism and thrill-seeking, Western cinema has no influence on the mass film. (India is the one major market Hollywood has never figured how to crack.)

Instead of the earlier West-Is-Bad-East-Is-Good formula, the emerging new pattern relies on revenge. The good man is driven by the evils of society, represented by the villain; sees his parents, brother or sister, or friend humiliated and destroyed; resolves to take revenge. Often, in this noble cause, God comes to his aid as well, besides an altogether handy providence. He turns into a Robin Hood, taking from the rich and giving to the poor—which justifies his violence, gets the audience on his side, and leaves the film-maker free to glorify that violence as means to an end. Perhaps this formula reflects the absence of a social philosophy and hence concerted social action; it is up to the individual to correct social wrongs to the extent he can, for no larger force is going to organize a just society.

Once the original sin or social inaction has been established, the individual's violence is washed clean, and fantasizing about it is fully reconcilable with a high opinion of oneself. This is particularly so since all is done for the sake of the family, which is threatened then reunited in three-fourths of all popular films. Not unnaturally, such justifiable identification with banditry boosts the morale of the have-nots who comprise a large part of the audience, hungry for the goodies and seething with the discontent of being denied. Good luck must be around the corner, and may well depend on a baritone voice and a brash manner. For the illiterate masses, the cinema remains the sole interpreter of the world and its phenomena in the absence of traditional guides who have disappeared or become ineffective, and of new guides which might take their place.

The number of songs in each film has come

down and now averages about four, many popular films getting away with as few as three; but total freedom is still impossible. Occasional efforts at pure narrative such as *Achanak*, whose story about the adultery of a soldier's wife and the husband's return, revenge, and capture was uninterrupted by song and dance numbers, have been well made but unimpressive at the box office. Song and dance interludes must still hold up the narrative, although there is today more of an effort to weave them into the story, as in *Sholay* (1975), a "curry Western" technically as well made as any similar work out of Hollywood, and by no means merely a variety show dressed up with a bandit story. There is also the strategy of integrating the songs by simply making them part of the characters' horseplay and general *joie de vivre*. This was done with some success in *Amar Akbar Anthony*, an improbable tale of a Hindu, a Muslim, and a Christian who turn out to be brothers; the overcoming of communal prejudices and emergence of a deep camaraderie among the three had tremendous appeal, and the film was a landmark in the growth of the "family" theme.

However the songs are worked in, the voices are likely to be those of two sisters, Lata Mangeshkar and Asha Bhonsle—who between them sing some 500 film songs each year. Their reassuring soprano voices are dubbed into scenes with no thought of tonal perspective; no matter how near or distant a character is, the song remains at the same volume—top volume.

Nonetheless, the film songs are written by top writers and composed very expertly. The accompaniment is equally skillful, and the artistry of the whole is the despair (and the model) of film industries in neighboring countries. Songs are the main ingredient of success in a popular film, next to the stars themselves, and if the songs are good, audiences return again and again to a film. Radio, records, and television help in spreading these songs across the country, but in India the cinema is the fountainhead of popular music. One suspects that many popular film-makers today, more assured in their technique and less in need of musical props, would like to go on to straight narrative but are prisoners of the public they once taught to accept music as an essential part of cinema.

Bobby (1973) is a typical example of how the usual song and dance numbers operate. The boy and the girl (Rishi Kapoor and "Dimple") are both young and handsome and innocent-looking enough to be credible as young lovers à la *Love Story*; but every time their innocence becomes convincing after a scene or two, "Dimple" breaks into sexy hipwiggling and breast-shaking. The moment the dance is over, she returns to her demure charm. In Kapoor's own later *Satyam Shivam Sundaram*, the songs are more integrated with the religious aspect which the director sets up as a tension-creating foil to the sexual allure of his underclad heroine (Zinnat Aman). But the film failed at the box office, perhaps because of its excessive dependence on the female body at the expense of all else and its overplaying of the de Millian religion-cum-sex card.

One factor which remains common to the bandit film, the "social" film, the mythological, or whatever, is the minimal role usually played by the director. Guru Dutt was one director who had created something of a personal cinema within the commercial format, but his performance in the fifties and early sixties has not been repeated. The success or failure of a film today depends on the stars and the music director and sometimes the scripwriter, rather than the director, who is more akin to a technical manager of the enterprise. The star, in fact, is more central to the film than all the others, because the subject and the writer are subservient to him. It is Amitabh Bachchan who made the revenge film a success by playing the lead role in as many as 18 such films, all of which were successful. Each successive film on the subject is a refinement of the earlier one; it is as if the same film is being made again and again and perfected in the process. Any gimmick which works in one is repeated in the next; the ones that don't click are dropped. The music director directs what is called "the picturization of songs"; the fight director directs fight scenes and chases; the dance director directs the dance numbers; the dialogue is actually directed by the stars who often rewrite them, expertly, on the spot—they know what kind of dialogue will be effective for them. Ways of shooting scenes are, more often than not, set ways. All this leaves little room for the director. One thing that he does *not* do is control all aspects

of the making of the film. He is more completely a non-*auteur* of the work than any hack Hollywood director ever was, and even the director of a highly successful film does not thereby earn more creative freedom in making his next.

Thus "progress" in the main body of the commercial cinema can be illusory. Its subjects today are a little less orthodox and its technical level has improved a great deal. But its creativity remains in doubt. It is the total impersonality of the film-making process which makes Indian cinema so radically different from the films of the West. Despite its long history and immense size the Indian cinema has consistently failed to create artistically valid works within the commercial format. This has led to an altogether artificial polarity between the "commercial" film and the "art" film.

Westerns by Wellman or Wyler or Ford had individuality within genre conventions. If Ford had made *High Noon*, it would have been strikingly different from Zinnemann's film. No such distinctions mark off *Sholay* from other Indian revenge films.

When, Satyajit Ray came out with *Pather Panchali* in 1955, its revolt against the current commercial cinema could not have been more complete. It was shot entirely on location on a very low budget, with unglamorous nonprofessionals, without a trace of sexual love interest, indeed almost without a story. It used Indian music on the sound track, and the only song in it was sung incompletely in the broken voice of a decrepit old woman. It was a film of deep compassion about a group of poor people, seen as individual human beings. It was completely regional, taking place at a specific time and place. It was also intensely personal and all the aspects of film-making were firmly in the hands of the director. Each one of these things broke a rule of the film establishment of the time.

Naturally, Ray remains the father figure of the counterforce against the commercial cinema in India. But over the years, he has tried his hand at many things in many ways and the perceptions of his admirers and followers have also changed to some extent. In the years since *Charulata* (1964) there has been a certain amount of discontent with Ray's remoteness from the "burning issues,"

which caused a turn first to Ritwik Ghatak and then, to a lesser extent, to Mrinal Sen, for a more forthright anti-establishment focus. Particularly in *Pratidwandwi* (*The Adversary*, 1970) and *Jana Aranya* (*The Middleman*, 1975), Ray came close to grappling with "the burning issues." Even so, the feeling persisted among many that here was a great film-maker, who represented a previous era dominated by the ideas of Rabindranath Tagore, looking at contemporary reality rather from the outside, bemoaning the fading away of earlier, perhaps nobler, values ineffective in the post-independence world of harsh reality, plagued by unemployment and riddled with corruption. Ray's extraordinary ability to lift a problem out of its national confines onto a universal level tends to leave some dissatisfied. His role as a chronicler of change in an ancient country slowly but inexorably moving into the modern world does not attract as many as forcefully as it once did. *Ashani Sanket* (*Distant Thunder*, 1973) was considered by many to be too "beautiful" to suggest the menace of famine. His perception of the stark contrast between the lush green beauty of nature and the grey specter of a man-made famine was lost on many who ached to see a stronger and more direct treatment of such themes. *Shatranj-ke-khilari* (*The Chessmen*, 1978) is perhaps his most exquisite and most deeply felt film since *Charulata*, as much in the breadth of its intellectual perception and its fine sense of irony as in the sensitivity of its detail and its insights into moments when the personal and the historical meet. Yet it must be counted as one of Ray's least understood films, among the wider audience as well as younger film-



Satyajit Ray's SHATRANJ-KE-KHILARI ►

makers and film buffs. The time may come when these films will be re-viewed in tranquillity, and rediscovered. Right now, there appears to be a sense of hurry about the proceedings, an impatience to get on with it, and to get there faster, along a different route.

Yet the "creative" cinema as opposed to the "commercial"—however artificial such a polarity may seem—still defines itself in Ray's terms. For 25 years, it has stood in opposition to everything the commercial cinema represents. It remains predominantly a cinema of social conscience. Its style is cast in the realist-narrative mold and much of it explores the effects of rapid change in the body of a tradition-ridden society. In its awareness of the best of Western cinema, its avoidance of song and dance routines, glamor and overblown instrumental music, and in the slow rhythm of many of its films, it stays close to the original inspiration provided by Ray.

The new cinema rejects the smug self-satisfaction of an affluence that feeds the overwhelming majority on a diet of dreams, and leaves some 40 percent below the poverty line. Films like Shyam Benegal's *Ankur* or *Nishant*, B.V. Karanth's *Chomana Dudi*, Mrinal Sen's *Oka Oorie Katha* or *Parasuram* refuse to allow the beneficiaries of the new-found affluence to forget the rest of the country. They seek out the problem areas—whether caste or communal problems, landlordism, economic disparity, poverty or superstition, the rights of women or child abuse. It is a cinema that dearly loves to prick the affluent minority's balloon of self-esteem and reveal the stark truth about India. At the same time, it has a sense of concern for the individual human being, and does not deal with him as an abstraction.

Basically, this cinema is regional in character. It stresses the individual traits of an area rather than superficial similarities brought about by the advent of industry and modern communication. The hero may wear regional clothes without being an object of ridicule. But its language limits its market, and it can make an all-India reputation only as "art." (In using the word "regional," one must make an exception in the case of the Tamil and Telegu films which are almost as "big" and as given to unrealistic extravagance as the Hindi.)

Although Hindi is a nearly all-India language

as far as the cinema is concerned, oddly enough the creative cinema in Bombay heightens regional characteristics in language, dress, names, and manners as much or more than films actually made in Gujarat or Assam, Orissa or Andhra. So "regionalism" belongs as much to the country of the mind as to geographical origin. Shyam Benegal's or Basu Chatterjee's films are as regional as Bengali films even though they are made in Bombay within the ambit of the commercial cinema. Regional cinema tends to be creative; creative cinema tends to be regional.

In the fifties and sixties, there was hardly any creative cinema outside Bengal. In Bombay, Bimal Roy and later Hrishikesh Mukherjee made above the average films by transferring the values of standard Bengali cinema into Hindi, but omitting the vulgarity and exaggeration of the usual commercial Hindi film. It was towards the end of the sixties that the focus of good film-making shifted, first to Bombay, then to the South.

The green signal came in 1969 with the sanction of a small unsecured loan by the Film Finance Corporation (FFC) of the Government of India, to Mrinal Sen for making his *Bhuban Shome*, named after an uptight railway official out on a bird-shooting holiday. Although far from being a masterpiece, the film had a freshness and *joie de vivre*, a vigorous technique (inspired somewhat by the French *nouvelle vague*) and a sense of humor which enchanted the wide audience it was able to reach in Hindi. The self-righteous bigwig of the fourth largest railway system in the world is brought down to earth through his encounter with village realities and the charming young wife of one of his corrupt employees, played by newcomer Suhasini



BHUBAN SHOME: Uptal Dutt the uptight railway official dons country garb to fool the birds. ►



GARM HAWA. Photo: Hindi Film Project, UC Berkeley

Mulay. The success of *Bhuban Shome* caused something of a stir among the large middle-class Hindi-speaking audience starved of intelligent cinema by a film industry that aims at the lowest common denominators of taste.

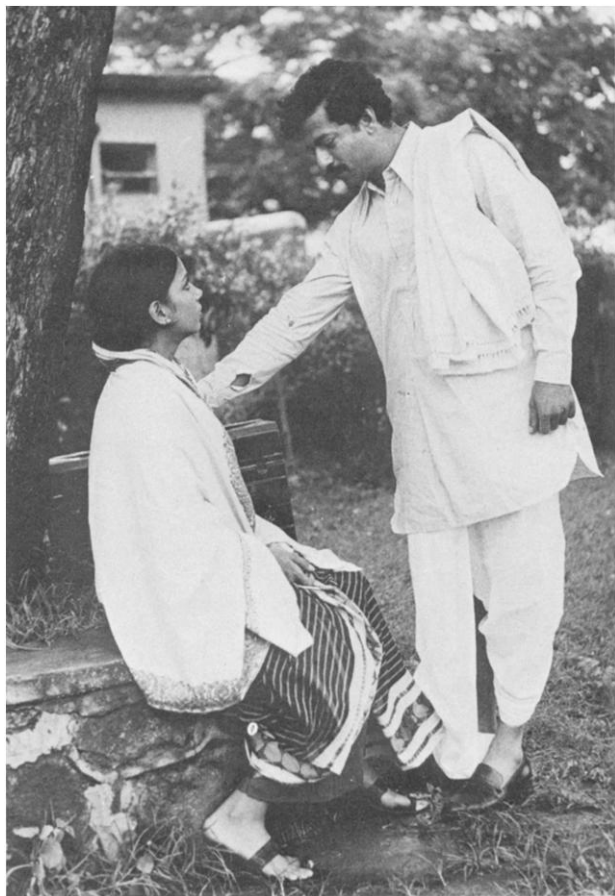
The success of *Bhuban Shome* also encouraged the FFC to finance a large number of film-makers, many of them making their first film. A spate of new films resulted, notably M.S. Sathyu's *Garm Hawa* (*Hot Wind*, 1974), a vivid glimpse into the life of the large Muslim minority of India. A sensitive and courageous work on a highly controversial subject, the film had some initial difficulty in obtaining national exhibition. Being compassionate and realistic but nonpartisan, it left the larger sections of both communities dissatisfied; but more perceptive audiences responded to it warmly. The fears and frustrations of the Muslims, who had ruled the subcontinent for 500 years but were reduced, with the departure of the British, to a large island surrounded by an ocean of Hindus, was brought out poignantly. According to Satyajit Ray, it is one of the two worthwhile films to come out of the "new wave" in Bombay. The second, *Ankur* (*The Seedling*, 1974) was made by Shyam Benegal, who turned to his first feature after an elegant apprenticeship in advertising and documentary films. Stylistically, *Ankur* owes rather more to Ray than *Garm Hawa*; its glow an even rhythm, its understatement, its shying away from the direct sexual encounter which is central to its story, are reminiscent of Ray. It is a polished piece of work, meticulously structured, directed with assurance and acted superbly by the newcomers Shabana Azmi (now a household word) and Anant Nag. The theme of the tyrant landowner who takes advantage of his women employees reappears later

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in more thundering tones in *Nishant* (*Night's End*, 1975). Although not financed by the FFC, Benegal's first film belongs in its impulse to the new wave brought about by the intervention of governmental finance.

From *Nishant* on, Benegal places action sequences in the center of his scheme and approaches them head-on. The social commitment is directly expressed. Unlike Ray, Benegal takes sides, and his characters are sharply divided between the oppressor and the oppressed. At the same time, he does not have a simplistic faith in the efficacy of revolutions. *Nishant* surges towards revolt against oppression but ends in misgivings, *Manthan* (*The Churning*, 1976)'s overt defeat for the reformer is underscored with hope; the actress of *Bhumika* (*The Role*, 1977) shuttles between an assertion of her freedom and need for dependence on a man; the dogman of *Kondura* (*The Boon*, 1977) is torn by doubt about the truth of his visions. Benegal's accent on confrontations and the apparent simplicity of his resolutions has made it easier for him to get close to the mass audience, particularly in *Junoon* (*A Flight of Pigeons*, 1978) a Ruskin Bond story of the 1857 mutiny against the British, produced by one of the foremost stars of the Hindi cinema, Shashi Kapoor. The period and the locale are close to those in Ray's *Shatranj*, but the treatment could not be more different. Making an expensive all-India film for the first time, Ray retains the same delicate and personal style, rich with nuances, as in his low-budget Bengali films; Benegal cuts his ambiguities and goes for the drama and the action, with a flourish, but on one level.

No less individual is the work of Basu Chatterjee whose *Sara Akash* (*The Entire Sky*, 1969) was financed by the FFC and dealt with the subject of alienation between husband and wife. Visually rich, with its fine compositions and eye for locale, the film showed no promise of the wit and lightness of touch and shrewdness of observation which emerged later in this director's enormous output. Chatterjee's instant success with the Hindi-speaking intelligentsia, large enough to make a profit for his low-cost films, attracted the attention of commercial cinema finance sources with his *Rajaganandha* (*The Lily*). The audience was delighted to recognize itself in the unpretentious hero in



Basu Chatterjee's *SWAMI*

familiar but amusing situations. Chatterjee's work does not extend beyond this and lays no claim to high seriousness, but his popularity, earned without altogether surrendering his individual character, suggests a new and welcome orientation in the mass cinema.

Of the other products of FFC's munificence, a strand was represented by Mani Kaul and Kumar Sahnî whose entire output of four films failed to obtain release in any theater circuit. Both graduates of the government's Film Institute in Poona and both under the spell of Robert Bresson, they could not be further removed from Benegal, Chatterjee, or Sathyu. Mani Kaul's long silences in *Uski Roti* (*Daily Bread*, 1970) are sustained by memorable imagery and communicate some inner tension but call for a degree of participation that only the most committed audiences can provide. After about 20 minutes, the interest of *Ashad Ka*

Ek Din (*A July Day*, 1972)'s classicism turns into a self-indulgent *tour de force*; the vivid color and sound of *Duvidha* (*Dilemma*, 1973)'s dream hovers strangely between interiority and the tourist poster. Kumar Sahnî's *Maya Darpan* (*Magic Mirror*, 1972) is similar to Kaul's work in its search for inner tension expressed in a non-narrative style with vivid images and dialogue rendered without modulation. The two directors' initial output perhaps represents a direct outcome of the film buff's exposure to world cinema, Indian in content but alien in style, personal to the extent of rejecting the audience.

The new wave in Bombay thus took two opposite paths. One began well within the forms of the new cinema developed in Bengal in the fifties and sixties but travelled towards a superior commercial cinema. The other reacted against the norms of commercial cinema with an extreme and somewhat pretentious personalization.

It is in the South that one finds more of a continuity with the early trends set in Bengal. In the communist-run, highly literate Southeastern state of Kerala, and also in its neighbor Karnataka, film-makers have consistently paid attention to problems of poverty, ignorance, and superstition. *Chemmeen* (1965), by Ramu Kariat in Kerala, is usually cited as the first notable creative film in the South, but it did not go much further than surface realism in recounting a famous novel on fisherfolk. It was with Pattabhi Rama Reddy's *Samskara* (1970) that the first powerful cinematic statement was made in the Southern cinema. The problem posed in its stark visuals is not of the struggle of tradition with modernity but of the inner dilemmas of Brahmin conservatism in a small village, which could have occurred a thousand years ago. Its tightly structured script and its remarkable close-ups of ageless Brahmin faces arise from within a strong Indian identity, rediscovered with conviction. Girish Karnad's performance epitomises Ray's classic description of Eastern expression: "Calm without: fire within." In awakening to its identity, the Southern Film accentuates tradition and village life, achieving a natural rhythm and universality in the process. Karnad's own *Kaadu* (*The Forest*, 1973) and *Vamsa Vriksha* (*The Genealogical Tree*, 1971) are rather more dramatic than cinematic, his tech-

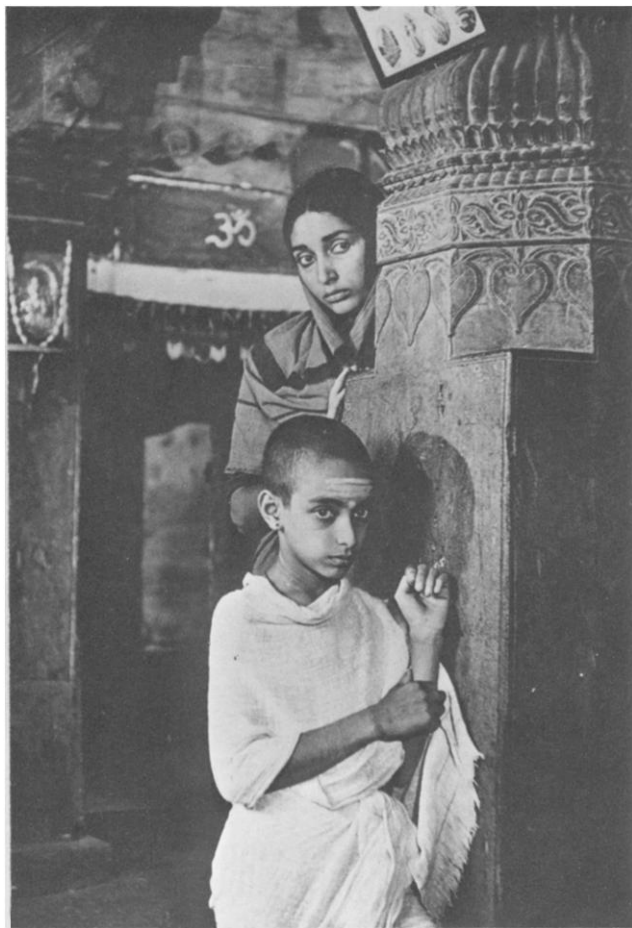
nical liberation coming more in *Godhuli* (*The Cow-Dust Hour*, 1977, co-directed with B.V. Karanth) and particularly in *Ondanondu Kalladalli* (*Once Upon a Time*, 1978), a fascinating homage to Kurosawa. Karnad makes remarkable use of nearly lost traditions in Indian martial arts to provide a perfect correlative to *Seven Samurai's* ronins on the rampage.

Karanth, who co-directed *Godhuli* (a rather awkward attempt at confrontation of East and West at a grassroots level) with Karnad, had earlier made a starkly powerful film, *Chomana Dudi* (*Choma's Drum*, 1975). The image of the landless laborer, sickened by everything in his life, playing the drum as though it invokes some cosmic doomsday, is unforgettable. So are the structure, mood and atmosphere of the first film by young Girish Kasaravalli, another graduate of the Poona

Institute, *Ghatashraddha* (*Funeral Rites*, 1977). The film deals starkly with a traditional practice, in its area, of performing death rites for a living person who comes into conflict with the rigorous prescriptions of an orthodox society. The woman in this film, a widow since childhood, commits grievous sin by falling for the village teacher and getting pregnant. She is turned promptly into a non-person and condemned to a living death outside the village. The practice itself has become rare today, but the exorcism of its ghost is a part of the general process of cleansing modern India of an accumulated load of superstition.

Poverty, caste, tradition, the village—these are the stuff of Kannada cinema. India has many ghosts to exorcise, and nowhere has its cinema sought to do so more than in Karnataka.

The Brahmin problem does not exercise minds as much in Kerala (where the Muslim and Christian populations constitute 40 percent of the total). But tradition does. In M. T. Vasudevan Nair's *Nirmalyam* (*The Offering*, 1973) the village oracle's services are no longer required by society; he is kept from starvation only by the munificence of his wife's lover, and chooses death by his own hand in the presence of the goddess who gives him his powers, in one final performance of his dance. This dramatic climax is made memorable by the intense, entranced performance of the actor Anthony. The rest of the film has a slightly theatrical-literary ring and the cinematic realization is rather uneven. Adoor Gopalakrishnan, graduate of the Poona Film Institute and film-club enthusiast, is more at home in cinema if less inclined towards heights of intensity. His two films, *Swayamvaram* (*Own Choice*, 1972) and *Kodiyettam* (*Ascent*, 1977) have the unobtrusive charm of fascinated observation, free of self-conscious structuring or search for social meaning. Yet neither the unusual marriage by choice which ends in defeat in *Swayamvaram* nor the drifter's awakening to responsibility in *Kodiyettam* are without structure or meaning. In the gentle, slow rhythm of his films and their often wordless lyricism, Gopalakrishnan reminds one of Ray. Wordless observation is also the forte of G. Aravindan's *Thampu* (*The Tent*, 1978) but by pushing the realism to its logical, unstructured, conclusion, the director makes his



◀ Meena Kulappa as the widow in Girish Kasaravalli's *GHATASHRADDHA*

fascinating style somewhat untenable for a full-length feature.

The new cinema in Karnataka and Kerala is similar to the earlier Bengal "wave" in more ways than one. In its preoccupation with village tradition, there is the same renewed sense of identity with the people, a deliberate denial of the cultural-economic gulf that separates the city intellectual with a western style education from the rural and the traditional. There is also a faith in humanity and in the future of the country underlying the exploration of tradition and the exposure of social evils. The awareness of massive poverty and the sense of guilt arising from it give the films a moral outlook. In Bengal, this slowly gave way to cynicism and despair and a return to weak escapist routine; the best of southern cinema may avoid that fate for an unusual economic reasons, the continued liberal subsidy from state governments for good cinema that has won them national and

international glory. The relative commercial success of the low-budget film has brought augmented state support, tax concessions, and large monetary rewards.

In spite of the brief promise held out by the powerful if literary work of writer D. Jayakantan more than a decade ago (*Unnai pol Oruvan*, 1966), the Tamil cinema has failed to throw up any major talent or movement outside of the commercial cinema whose mores, if anything, are worse than those of Bombay. With taxes rationalized by a film actor chief minister, the commercial cinema is burgeoning, its success preventing the emergence of any counterforce. In the remaining South Indian language of Telegu, the only notable work, in spite of governmental incentives, has been that of outsiders Mrinal Sen and Shyam Benegal. Sen's *Oka Oorie Katha* has the starkness of *Chomana Dudi* (both feature the same remarkable actor, Vasudev Rao) shot with a rich humor and com-

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plexity of character which lifts this film above the posterish simplicity of some of Sen's other works. Benegal's film has a more evocative atmosphere and a simpler flow of events than usual with this meticulous if sometimes over-structured director.

Altogether, the mantle of the new cinema movement pioneered by Bengal appears to have fallen on the South rather than on Bombay. There are signs that it will outgrow the present easily universalized preoccupation with tradition and village life with their natural unity and rhythm. It will be interesting to see how it copes with more urban problems and their complex interactions with rural life, and captures the dissonances and disjunctions arising from them. In spite of the rural bias, there is already a rich variety of styles and talents, a

sense of a new, rising cinema absorbed in its problems but imbued with faith and hope.

Will the polarity between the creative and the commercial cinema, still very marked, give way to a more continuous range? The films of Basu Chatterjee and lately of Benegal (even Karnataka's Karnad with *Ondanondu Kalladalli*) are steps towards creativity within the parameters of the all-India box office. With an assured economic future before it, with talent and resources expanding, Indian cinema may one day arrive at its "golden age"—producing a welter of films some of which will, in various degrees, combine creativity with commerce, and open up the entire spectrum from the most personal art to the most passive spectacle that now dominates its larger dimensions.

Reviews

THE SPACE MOVIE

Director/Screenwriter/Editor: Tony Palmer. Music ("The Space Symphony"): Mike Oldfield.

The Space Movie (one of the 1980 Filmex offerings I attended with greatest anticipation) identifies itself right from the beginning: Ten years ago, man first landed on the moon, and this film is a celebration of that achievement. This review will examine the perverse way in which the film celebrates the lunar defloration.

Put together from NASA and National Archive footage, the film creates a meaning for the moon landing by focusing primarily on three elements. Above all, it is fascinated with thrust. Second, the film is interested in the men who bring it off. Third, the film's reconstruction of this piece of history involves the beauty of the moon shot and of space itself.

The narration sets these primary elements in the context of our early "space defeats" by the Russians. After some comments by Werner Von Braun (the "German American scientist"), we get a history of space exploration from 1961 forward, where video images and headlines in various languages chronicle Russia's initial successes, with the refrain: "And the United States sent its congratu-

lations." The voice-over tells how the US put forth a mighty effort to land the first manned capsule on the moon so as to win the competition for world prestige, rather than for any intrinsic or even any other instrumental values. In other words, we undertook this mission to promote our national potency in the space face-off.

In this context, it is not surprising that, above all, the film celebrates the enormous, upright rocket and its straining for climactic release from the earth's gravity. Much of its screen time is occupied by images of the huge projectile being worked on, supported by its scaffolding, poised in readiness to explode upward, and finally doing so ever so slowly, ever so powerfully, moving up, up, up, and in, in, in, as it penetrates the heavens ever further, thrust upward by its unthinkable power—"Eleven million, seven hundred thousand pounds of thrust," the voice-over tells us proudly. "Your thrust is lookin' good," say the guys in Houston. As the highly derivative and predictable music moves toward cosmic climax yet one more time, the rocket's endless explosion leaves a fiery trail across the cosmos—what spews out of the rocket is plentiful and hot! As if to reiterate the importance of this imagery, the film returns to it after the final credits begin, giving us a close-up of the jets, iden-